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|  | | **7 April 2021** | |
|  | | **English only** | |
| Director, Telecommunication Development Bureau | | | |
| Opening remarks of Ms Doreen Bogdan-Martin, Director,  Telecommunication Development Bureau | | | |
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Distinguished delegates, ladies & gentlemen, Salaam Alaikum

Good morning, afternoon and evening.

It is a pleasure to welcome to our ITU Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Arab States region.

I want to start by thanking all you for your commitment to ITU's Development Sector, and for your support for the many activities that are advancing digital transformation across the 22 countries of the Arab region at a time when connectivity has never been more critical.

Our next World Telecommunication Development Conference comes at a defining moment for the world, and for ITU's place in it. It also comes at a time of enormous transformation for the Arab States region itself, which is already home to some of the world’s most connected and technologically advanced nations.

In the past few months we have seen the region take another bold step forward, with the launch of the Al Amal – or ‘Hope’ – probe to Mars.

The Mars mission represents not only the UAE but the Arab world’s first venture into space, and confirms the region’s arrival on the world stage as a leading pioneer in science and technology, as well as its commitment to ever-closer engagement and collaboration with the broader international community.

These developments come at a critical moment for the world, with the global pandemic underlining the stark reality that in today's societies, connectivity is not just important – it is crucial… it was a nice to have and now it is a must have

Digital solutions will be our key to success in this final Decade of Action to achieve our own Connect 2030 agenda, the 17 SDGs and the UN Agenda 2030.

And ITU’s World Telecommunication Development Conference is the event where the promise of what technology can do for global development must translate into action.

By bringing together Member States, the private sector, financial institutions like regional development banks, and key civil society organizations, WTDC-21 offers a unique opportunity to harness that clear global recognition around the urgency to bridge the digital divide, build long-lasting partnerships that advance our digital transformation agenda.

To ensure this crucially important conference delivers on its promise, we have introduced some new elements in the preparatory process and the conference itself working in close coordination with you.

1. One new element of our preparatory process is the Road to Addis … a discussion series on critical development topics, which aims to build awareness and excitement among our traditional stakeholders as well as helping us reach out to important new constituencies.

The next stop on the Road to Addis is on April 28th, where we will be grappling with the thorny issue of financing and investment.

1. Another important new element in our revamped preparatory process is the establishment of our three inter-regional coordination meetings, or IRMs to complement the six regional RPMs. Many of you already participated in the first of these meetings; the next will take place on May 12th, and I hope, once again, that you will be able to join us.
2. One major new feature of our upcoming WTDC is, of course, the inclusion of a Partnerships track within the main body of the conference.

Comprising high-level panels and thematic discussions, this new track will enable us to expand our conversation to bring in new players and to more actively engage with future development partners, including international financial institutions, regional development banks, our UN sister agencies, private sector players, and civil society.

1. And WTDC-21 will also see the launch of our inaugural WTDC Youth Summit, to be held just prior to the start of the conference, as part of ITU's 'Generation Connect' initiative.

I am excited to see the Generation Connect initiative for the Arab region being launched during this RPM.

I do hope you will help us to engage the youth in our deliberations so that they can contribute to and participate in the development of our programmes.

1. To encourage the equal participation of women in leading roles in the WTDC conference and process, we have launched a new Network of Women – or NoW – for the Development Sector. There will be a dedicated side-event to unveil this new network in the Arab States region, during this RPM.

AT the event, participants from this region, my colleagues and I will share more information about how you can support it, and how you can get involved.

And, finally, noting the increasing importance our Member States are according to digital innovation, I wish to recognized the UAE for partnering with us on our new i-CoDI, the International Center of Digital Innovation.

This platform has demonstrated its effectiveness in the region by utilizing it, for the first time, to help formulate the priorities of the regional membership during the workshop that was held on 30-31 March. During this workshop we had around 85 participants from almost all the Arab member states including Member States, Sector Members and Academia.

Dear colleagues,

I spoke earlier of the Arab States’ growing competence as leader in digital innovation and development. While this is undoubtedly true, we know that, across this vast region, large disparities remain.

The latest figures from ITU’s Digital Trends report that we are unveiling this morning reveal stark contrasts between the GCC countries, with their world-class connectivity, and the region’s six LDCs[[1]](#footnote-1), where less than 10% of the population is using the internet.

The COVID crisis has highlighted the impact of the digital divide on the nearly 350 million people in the region that are still unable to connect.

And while the region overall has made progress in key areas like household connectivity, with at-home internet access growing from around 52% of households in 2017 to close to 60% at the end of 2019, there remains a gaping urban-rural divide, with 74% of urban households connected, versus just 38% of rural dwellings.

Across the region as a whole we also see a persistent gender gap, with an average of 61% of men using the internet, but just 47% of women, with chronically low levels of women’s connectivity in poorer nations skewing the parity we see in the GCC countries.

And while steady progress has been made in extending coverage, affordability of digital devices and services remains a major barrier to uptake.

A handful of countries in the region have now achieved the Broadband Commission’s target of entry-level broadband access at less than 2% of per capita GNI – including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but in some nations[[2]](#footnote-2) cost of service was still more than 30% of per capita GNI at end 2019.

ITU data also reveals that 95% of individuals in the region are now covered by a mobile network, with more than 90% within reach of a 3G signal.

Yet the fact remains that only around 55% are using the Internet, with the high cost of smartphones and lack of digital skills identified as major impediments.

COVID has been called the great accelerator for anything digital.

That is certainly true in this region, with a rising appetite for e-commerce…, and its subsequent positive impact on digital payments.

More countries in the region have also boosted digital solutions including the infusion of numerous new approaches to education and healthcare.

I do want to acknowledge these efforts and the way the region has demonstrated both tenacity and determination to step up digital progress.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Overcoming the hurdles to affordable universal connectivity across the entire Arab States region is at the heart of the five Regional Initiatives adopted by the World Telecommunication Development Conference in 2017.

These Regional Initiatives remain our roadmap for delivering on the priorities of the region, and I am pleased to report that we have advanced well on a number of concrete projects to respond to these priorities.

To give just a few examples:

* A network of 22 technoparks and incubators has been established to promote partnerships and collaboration around innovation and entrepreneurship.
* The Arab network of the ITU Centres of Excellence has delivered over 40 training and certification sessions, empowering over 2,000 stakeholders.
* A large-scale global project to Create a Safe and Prosperous Cyberspace for Children was established late last year, and we have continued to strengthen relationships with key regional institutions working on child online safety, including Meem Ain, NCA, and NAUSS from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
* In the area of e-waste, we established a large scale project providing direct support to 22 Arab countries, and signed a cooperation agreement with the UN University to strengthen our statistics gathering efforts . We also provided direct technical assistance to 11 countries in the area of e-waste data, policy, and regulation.
* We forged 6 new strategic partnerships in the area of digital financial inclusion, including with the World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Meem Ain, UNESCWA, and UNESCO.
* And we established 8 important new partnerships to support our efforts in the area of IoT, smart cities and big data.
* New partners include Intel, the GSMA, Huawei, Siemens, Google, Nokia, Ericsson, Microsoft, Nile University-Egypt, and HERE Technology, and we are currently working with TPRA-Sudan to provide assistance to Arab countries on IPv6 and IoT-related policy, strategy and capacity-building activities.
* We recently signed a cooperation framework agreement with the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization (ARCO) to further support the region in facing emergency situations.

I want to thank our many partners for their collaboration and contribution to ITU's Regional Initiatives, and to the Arab States region’s ambitious digital development agenda.

This year marks 30 years since ITU established the Arab Regional Offices which helps us maintain our direct contact with our members.

We are pleased to see all the developments which we believe are accelerated by our presence in the region.

We hope to continue the engagement so that we can help meet your needs even more effectively.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our BDT end-of-year review, we stressed the need to build forward better together.

Our Regional Preparatory Meetings are a vital element of that collaborative effort, and will be critical to the success of WTDC.

We have an incredible opportunity to leverage the power of digital to truly change the world.

I know you all share that vision and enthusiasm for what we might achieve, and I look forward to very fruitful and insightful discussions.

Thank you.

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1. Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Comoros and Mauritania. Djibouti, Iraq, Mauritania and Yemen are also named as having affordability issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)